

Colombians in Pennsylvania: The Immigration Experience through one Man's Journey

Cándida Madrigal, PhD., LCSW-CA, LCSW-PA

Assistant Professor

Department of Social Work Education/Gerontology

California State University, Fresno

5310 N. Campus Drive, M/S PHS 102

Fresno, CA 93740-8019, USA

As President Kennedy (1959) stated, the United States is "*a society of immigrants, each of whom had begun life anew, on an equal footing. This is the secret of America: a nation of people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dare to explore new frontiers....*". Immigration can be considered one of life's major transitions for the individual and the family. The experience of each immigrant family is influenced by the reasons he/she leaves the country of origin, the resources, and the attraction to the country he/she has chosen to immigrate to. People leave their country of origin for numerous reasons: as political refugees, as economic emigrants, for religious reasons, searching for adventure, looking for educational opportunities, or just taking an extended vacation Migration has an impact on the immigrant's intent to permanently stay in another place; this movement may have both, positive and negative consequences to the person's well-being.

The process of immigration begins while the person is still in his/her home country; it involves all members of the family and entails gains and losses for everyone involved. This process is extensive, difficult, stressful, and in a lot of cases, traumatic. In order for the immigrant to succeed, the person has to be able to cope with the new environment and to manage their personal characteristics, such as self-reliance, ability to adapt and motivation to achieve (Segal, 2002, Segal, Elliott, & Mayadas, 2010).

Colombians comprised one of the largest numbers of South American born immigrants who entered the U.S, accounting for 32.7% of the overall South America-born populations in the United States (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Regardless of these facts, there are limited available historical references and empirical studies concerning Colombian immigrants to the U.S. The largest amount of research available is based on groups with ethnic labels such as "Hispanics" or "Latinos." Most of these studies are conducted with Cuban, Cuban American, Puerto Rican, mixed Mexican or Mexican American populations and Central/South American populations combined or under an "Other Hispanic" category (Rumbaut, 1996; Longres & Patterson, 2000; InfoPlease, 2020). Other studies are done with unspecified groups of Spanish speaking or Spanish surnamed populations. This approach is misleading since there are very important ethnic and cultural differences among these groups, such as whether they are Latin American or Caribbean.

In 1999, Guarnizo, Sanchez and Roach stated that, "While Colombians constitute an important wave of immigrants; nonetheless they are an understudied ethnic group" (p. 5), today, in the year 2020, they continue to be understudied. The limited literature available on Colombians' immigration to the United States identifies New York as the initial destination, and Florida as the second state where Colombians chose to arrive. Colombians later started migrating to other states and specific cities where they could find jobs and establish residency.

Circa 1969, Pennsylvania became a desirable destination for Colombians due to large number of companies and industries offering well paid jobs, the welcoming reception, and what many considered the "peaceful environment" to raise a family. Colombians' ability to adjust to the mainstream social and cultural surroundings was a contributing factor for them to stay permanently.

Presently there are numerous Colombian communities all over the state. One of these communities is located in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Again, no research has been found that specifically addresses the immigration experience of these Colombians.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the immigration experience of Colombians in the State of Pennsylvania and particularly in the County of Lancaster, through the lens of one Colombian immigrant. Thus, this study is a historical analysis of a one man's journey through the immigration process, juxtaposed with historical trends. It will also look at the intersection of race and ethnicity with other immigrants in the region and different organizations that impacted the identity of immigrant communities in the area. The implications to social work and human services will be discussed within the realm of this immigrant's experience. Since the study of Colombians in the U.S. is a new and relatively underreported area, this paper will also yield new insights into the factors that contribute to a positive immigration experience of Colombians in Pennsylvania, which is essential given the immigration reforms taking place and the effect they have on immigrants overall, and specifically on Colombian immigrants.

Why is it Important to Study Colombians in Pennsylvania?

The study of Colombian immigration patterns to the state of Pennsylvania is important for several reasons. First, it provides a way to understand the intricacies of the immigration process, the reasons Colombians had for leaving their country and the attraction to the State of Pennsylvania. It provides an opportunity to focus on the County of Lancaster in particular and the receiving destination's readiness to accommodate the Colombians arriving to their community. It offers an opportunity to better understand the Colombian immigrants' response to their new destination.

Second, this study is important because it also attempts to describe the kind of social services that were provided, but do not appear to have been documented. Extensive academic searches have been conducted by Madrigal (2008) regarding the arrival of Colombians and services to immigrant populations in Pennsylvania, specifically around the 1970's, without success. Documenting the arrival of immigrants to Pennsylvania, especially of Colombians, is important given all the benefits and social programs that were available at the time.

Third, it is also important to document record of events of minority communities. The connection between Colombia and the United States extends to all areas, political, social, cultural and economic; therefore, it is important to study this group because they have suffered the impact of the devastated social conditions in Colombia despite the distance between the two countries. In spite of the consequences of the drugs and violence in their native country, they have maintained a sense of community and cultural identity.

Fourth, it will assess the intersection of the experience of Colombians in the region with other immigrant communities, as such, it is essential to analyze if the experience of Colombians is similar to those of other immigrant groups in the region. This study is a step closer to achieving this understanding.

Immigration Patterns of Colombians: Waves

Records indicate that Colombians had begun arriving in the U.S. in the 1930's when there were 1,233 Colombians residing in the U.S., by the 1940s this number had reached 3,858 (United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, [USINS], 1970). According to Sanchez (2003) there have been three definite periods, waves, of Colombians immigration to the U.S.: 1945-1965; 1966-1990; and 1991-2000. His time periods of the waves are historically linked to what was taking place in Colombia, as well as with the United States' immigration policies and the overall receiving context.

The first wave of Colombian migration to the U.S., 1945-1965, corresponds with the political turmoil of the time and the 1949 assassination of a politician, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, which resulted in the period known as *La Violencia*, (The Violence), a civil war between the two political parties. Over 200,000 Colombians were killed most of the agriculture was shattered, and thousands of Colombians lost their land and were forced to move to major cities. Searching for a solution to this internal crisis, the elite political parties agreed on a pact which provided political power over the country during alternate election years to their parties for a period of sixteen-years (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Dix, 1987; Miville, Calle, Mendez & Borenstein, 2018; Osterling, 1989; Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003).

This pact created an “exclusionary political system,” which, in addition to the political violence in the country, the absence of economic opportunities, and the cultural magnetism to the US, including financial prospects, precipitated the exit of Colombians from their country (Sanchez, 2003, p.58). By the 1950s, there were 18,048 Colombian nationals in the U.S., and by 1960 there were 72,028 permanent Colombian residents (United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, [USINS], 1970).

The years between 1966 and 1990, the second wave of Colombian migration to the U.S., were characterized by the amendments to the immigration laws in the United States and the situation in Colombia getting worse, both economically as well as politically. The levels of internal political violence in the countryside had increased. The weak political and economic conditions of the country were additionally complicated by the reality that Colombia was rising as a major manufacturer, trafficker and provider of marijuana and cocaine as well as heroin to many parts of the world (Osterling, 1989; Sanchez, 2003). Migration of Colombians to the U.S. rose significantly during this period. By the end of the 1980s, there were 122,849 Colombians residing in the U.S. (USINS, 1995).

Wave three of Colombian immigration to the U.S. started in the year 1991. The decade of the 1990s was marked not only by the emerging internal/external political crises, but also by a disturbing connection among drug traffickers and the guerrilla groups, especially the *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army* (FARC) {Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia}, which sought total power of the drug trade (Shifter, 1999; Sanchez, 2003; Collier & Gamarra, 2001, Reimers, 2005). This produced a considerable apprehension for the United States government and its military. As a result, the U.S. administration pledged millions of dollars to support the Colombian government under “Plan Colombia” to eradicate drugs and combat the rebel groups (Shifter 1999; Sanchez, 2003; Collier & Gamarra, 2001, Reimers, 2005). The economic and political turmoil in the country, the escalating violence, the personal safety threats of extortion, kidnapping and murder, predisposed many wealthy individuals and families, as well as professionals, to leave Colombia (Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003; Collier & Gamarra, 2001). During these years, 137,985 Colombians obtained legal permanent resident status in the USA (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2009).

Colombians in the United States: Difficulties in determining the number

Statistics from the 2010 US Census indicated that there were approximately 900,000 documented Colombian born immigrants residing in the U.S. (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Many contend that this was not an accurate count, since it did not capture the undocumented persons who, because of fear of deportation, avoided the process of census count. Consequently, the exact number of Colombians in the U.S. is difficult to determine, especially through the 2000 US Census (Sanchez, 2003; Reimers, 2005; Collier & Gamarra, 2001). In 1999 alone, 366,000 Colombians applied for immigrant visas (Sanchez & Gomez, 2001). Furthermore, the Colombian government estimates that 10%, close to 5 million nationals, presently reside outside the home country, and about 1.5 million, both documented and undocumented, can be found all over the United States (Conexión Colombia, 2005). Empirical knowledge regarding their reception is limited.

The State of Pennsylvania has been a receiving Colombians since about 1969, and they reside in various counties throughout the State. The County of Lancaster especially has a significant community of Colombians; however, no empirical accounts have been found about this group. The importance of this community is not as much in the numbers, but in their resilience to withstand the debilitated impact that the situation in the home country has experienced, how they have overcome the discrimination and stereotypes imposed on them as a consequence of the drugs and violence in their country and how they have negotiated their identity as a community. The following section will address Colombian immigrants in Pennsylvania and will provide the available statistics.

The State of Pennsylvania and Colombian Immigrants.

In the search for articles and other information concerning Colombians as immigrants in the state of Pennsylvania, very little was found that has been written about them, especially no empirical research was found. With a state motto "Virtue, Liberty, Independence", and 67 counties, Pennsylvania is a state of rich history and tradition.

It has an estimated population of 12,702,379 (Census, 2010), which is very diverse. Besides the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Mennonites and the Amish, Pennsylvania's population has diversified and is comprised of Blacks, American Indians, Asians, Hispanic/Latinos, and other races. Racially and ethnically, the population consists of 10,406,288 (81.9%) White; 1,377,689 (10.8%) Black; 26,842 (0.2%) American Indian; 349,088 (2.7%) Asian; 300,983 (2.4%) Other race; 237,835 (1.9%) two or more races and 719,660 (5.7%) Hispanic/Latino (InfoPlease, 2020).

According to the 2005-2009 American US Census Bureau's Community Survey 5-Year Estimates data, Colombians in Pennsylvania comprised approximately 9,057 (US Census Bureau 2005-2009). However, the 2010 Census provides a demarcation of Latinos/Hispanics being from any racial group. It also provides a space under "another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin" to specify the country of birth. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2010), there were 636,555 individuals who reported having been born in Colombia in the 2010 US Census, of these 13,111 reside in the state of Pennsylvania. However, one of the difficulties counting the Colombian born residents in each of the counties in Pennsylvania is the fact that the 2010 US Census placed all peoples of Latin America background residing in the state of Pennsylvania as one group:

"The term Hispanic or Latino, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, refers to Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. On the 2010 Census form, people of Spanish/Hispanic/Latino origin could identify themselves as Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or "another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin." According to the 2010 Census, 50.5 million people or 16% of the population are of Hispanic or Latino origin. This represents a significant increase from the 2000 Census, which registered the Hispanic population at 35.3 million or 13% of the total U.S. population" (InfoPlease, 2020).

Given the above, it is impossible to know how many Colombians reside in Lancaster County and as such, no documentation has been found regarding the immigration experience of Colombians in the State of Pennsylvania, and specifically in the County of Lancaster. Many Colombians have established themselves in Lancaster County negotiating their identity as individuals and as a community, taking advantage of the services provided to them, while navigating the complexities of the local milieu and the upheaval in their native country. This case study is a first attempt to empirically document their experience.

Colombians in Pennsylvania: The Immigration Experience through one Man's Journey

Emilio, an 83-year-old Colombian immigrant from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania who was 42 when he immigrated to the U.S. in 1971, was interviewed for purpose of this study. When possible, the limited historical information that was found will be incorporated and information from other studies will be used to validate Emilio's experience. Emilio arrived during wave 2 of the immigration period of Colombians in the U.S.

Reasons for arriving in Pennsylvania

Emilio recalls the reason for his arrival to the state of Pennsylvania:

"I was a skilled mechanic and had taken numerous trainings and workshops. I had already begun to teach the new mechanics in my place of employment, so I was regarded as good. I knew I had a good chance to qualify for a work visa, that a friend had told me about. As soon as I had an opportunity and the money, I applied for a work contract. I was given a work contract and my "green card" (residency card) to come to the US. I did not know where the company that had contracted me was located, but that did not matter to me, so I came to a small town in the state of Pennsylvania, New Holland, as a legal immigrant because that's where the job was available at a company named Frank Ix".

According to Emilio, the textile factory *Frank Ix*, was one of the major employers in New Holland in the 60's and 70's and became a partner in the pipeline between Colombia and the US. Per conversations with other community members, this arrangement benefitted both sides greatly; the US received an already trained workforce, and the Colombian immigrants received all the benefits of being part of a vibrant economy, residing in a peaceful town that overall welcomed them, in a country that had establish itself as a world leader.

Later Pennsylvania began to be a desirable destination for Colombian immigrants who were residing in other states. The incorporation of Colombians into the job market in Lancaster County and other cities nearby depended on the robust textile industry prevalent in the North East states, the need for skilled workers, and the favorable US immigration laws at the time. The Textile industry was very prevalent in Pennsylvania and many Colombians made their mark and had excellent reputation as textile mechanics (personal communication with community leaders). As Sanchez (2003) indicates, the Colombian worker achieved a high level of acceptance from their North American bosses because they tended to be fairly skilled, well-educated and able to move up rapidly in the work environment.

First Wave of Colombian Immigration to the State of Pennsylvania

Per the limited information obtained and this study, Pennsylvania began receiving the first wave of Colombian immigrants circa 1969, which coincides with the second way of Colombians in other parts of the United States (Sanchez, 2003). Initially the Colombians who arrived in Pennsylvania came with work contracts as legal residents. Emilio explains:

“A few years prior to my arrival and in the early 70’s, several Colombian men, primarily from the city of Medellín, who were skilled mechanics or experts in textile weaving, became aware of the need in the US for skilled textile workers. They managed to connect with agents who had acquired work visas from various companies that were ready to act as sponsors for them to come to the US with a work contract and their legal status. Most of these companies were in the state of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania”.

Emilio’s recount of the arrival of Colombians to Pennsylvania coincides with Madrigal’s study where an attempt was made to recruit Colombian immigrants who had arrived between the years 1945- 1964 and no one was found. Although 40 Colombians responded the survey from Pennsylvania, most of them had arrived during the early 70’s and 80’s (Madrigal, 2008), establishing this as the first wave of Colombian immigrants to the Lancaster County area in Pennsylvania, primarily in New Holland, a small town also known as the “Garden Spot”, which enjoyed a very tranquil and prosperous life (personal interview with community leader). This also agrees with Sanchez (2003) and Collier & Gamarra’s (2001) indication that although Colombians initially arrived in New York and then moved to Florida, they later started migrating to other states in the U.S.

Skilled and semiskilled laborers looking for growth and opportunities

Although Emilio’s story confirms the push-pulled factors theory, it does not support Portes and Rumbaut’s (1990) concept that identify those immigrants that leave their country voluntarily as: (1) laborers or labor migrants who often have low levels of education and limited skills, (2) entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial with business experience who are looking for growth and opportunities, and (3) professionals or professional immigrants that are educated and have “strong professional skills” (p. 9). Emilio was a skilled mechanic, who had attended numerous trainings in his country, had “*an excellent reputation as a mechanic*”, owned his home in his native country, his children were attending a private school, and the family was enjoying a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. He came to the US with a job contract, earning a comparable salary to that of his US co-workers. In this sense, Emilio was part of a group who started displacing professionals as the primary immigrants, thus adding a fourth type of voluntary immigrant, that of a skilled and semiskilled laborer looking for growth and opportunities, to identify those immigrants that leave their country voluntarily.

Lancaster County as the Receiving Destination

The receiving destination’s readiness to accommodate the Colombians arriving to their community made a significant positive impact on Emilio’s family. The family was able to adapt and overcome the difficulties associated to being new immigrants and succeed in their new environment. They, however, were aware of the interrelation of Puerto Rican & Colombians.

Emilio states:

“We loved the town we were living in, sometimes we could see the difference about the way they would treat us (the town people, especially inside stores) and the way they would treat other Latinos, especially Puerto Rican. Overall, the Colombians who arrived in this town were of light skin color. Some of them looked very much like if they were born here. Although our children were a little darker (he laughs when he says “brown”), they still were treated well.

Social Services Available to Immigrants

When asked about the social services that were provided to the family, Emilio responded that there were several social services available to the whole family:

“We were very fortunate to have arrived when we did and to the place we did. At that time there were not many Latinos in the area. We were provided many services. They opened a “Bilingual” center, which was run by people, mainly women, who spoke both English and Spanish. My wife, as well as many other people who had recently arrived received English classes. I’m not sure if my wife “learned” English, but she enjoyed socializing very much. They also planned numerous field trips for the family and for the children, paid, I think with money provided by the government. We went to museums, touristic attractions, and many beautiful places. We also attended concerts and special events. We were provided many opportunities to get used to the way of life here; most of them were very good. I think that my children came out well, despite the disadvantages and discrimination because through the different activities, they were finding the things that they wanted to do and were being able to express themselves and become assertive.... The children were strong and did very well...”

Through conversations with other community leaders and Colombian residents, it was verified that the Bilingual/ESL Center where Emilio’s family received services, was established in the city of New Holland, PA. The Center provided numerous services such as Adult English classes and tutoring programs. Center personnel were also available to talk and provide guidance to immigrants. Through the Center’s auspices, some of their major undertakings were organizing trips during the summer to landmarks in different cities such as Washington D.C., the Lurraine Caverns in Virginia, and Yankee stadium in New York City. The professionals in charge worked very hard to keep harmony amongst the community members and made sure that the family members were being assimilated to the way of living in the US.

As Emilio further explains, immigrants in Lancaster County, PA, circa 1970 enjoyed coordinated social and educational services. The majority of these immigrants were from Colombia. The governmental institutions involved run very efficient programs. They made a very positive impact on the people they served since the immigrant community never really felt that they were being treated any different than anyone else. Educationally, all the Colombian children enjoyed an excellent education. Emilio feels that his “*prayers*” were answered regarding his desire to be able to provide a better life and the educational opportunities his family.

Emilio’s Immigrant Experience: An analysis

Given Emilio’s recount of his and his family’s immigration experience, it can be inferred that in order to obtain a successful adjustment of immigrant populations, social and other types of services are imperative during the initial time of residency in the United States. One of the major lessons that can be learned is that investing time and services in the new immigrant soon after their arrival, there is a great potential for the person to become financially independent and socially adapted.

The premise of the neoclassical economic theory based on the fact that migrants will move from low-wage countries to high-wage countries in a global labor market, if and when the wage differential is larger than the cost of moving proved right with Emilio (Todaro, 1969). The present study partially supports the traditional theory that explains that processes of international migration are basically economic in nature and that wage differentials between countries or regions and the costs incurred by moving are basic features of the decision to migrate.

The economic impacts of immigration affect all layers of society and to some, the benefits may not be sufficient for them to endure the experience in the new country. For others, like Emilio, the benefits outweighed the pain or discomfort, therefore contributing to their overall wellbeing. In Emilio’s case, not only did his economic situation improve, but his overall response to the immigration process was very positive.

As Segal (2002) posits, the immigration experience and the reaction it causes have to be viewed from both, the immigrant’s perspective, as well as from the context of the receiving country; emphasizing the importance of not grouping together all minority immigration experiences. In Emilio’s situation he had enough resources since he arrived with a job contract and a work permit, so he did not have to endure the hardships of undocumented immigrants.

Emilio reported that he felt strong and never doubted that he wanted to make a living in the US and take advantage of the many opportunities he and his family were being offered. The strengths of the immigrants are often associated with their families; the relationship of the family members and the systems surrounding them (Segal, 2002), and for Emilio, his family is his most valuable asset.

Emilio's account of the educational services Colombian children received concur with Madrigal (2008) who found that over 88.0% of participants in her study reported they had a high level of educational achievement, had completed some college or specialized training or above. Additionally, 13.3% reported having obtained an advanced degree. These findings also coincide with Gonzalez-Eastep (2007), Collier & Gamarra (2001), Sanchez (2003) and community leaders who describe the Colombian immigrant in the United States as being skilled and educated overall.

Implications to Social Work Practice, Research & Policy

The present study shows that there are a number of indicators that contribute to the psychosocial adjustment of immigrants to the receiving territory. According to Mahoney (2004) the social capital immigrants bring with them, plus their ability to integrate to the social, political and economic panorama of the receiving country, play an important part in the health and wellbeing of immigrants and in their ability to succeed in the new country. It is important for social workers to identify the positive indicators, as well as the stressors and traumatic events to the adaptation process.

The implications of this study to possible research are significant. This study is an introduction to the exploration of Colombian immigrants' wellbeing and how they can benefit from services while at the same time can become strong contributors to the social, economic and political spheres of the North American society. It is also a historical analysis of the services received when they arrived as immigrants as well as the assistance they received to make the transition and adapt to the new culture.

Policy makers and social workers should take into consideration the factors that help immigrant families adjust to the host country. They need to actively participate in the lobbying and recommendation of policies that assist immigrants and their families, at the local, state and national level, assist in the development and designing of service delivery that are favorable to immigrant families, especially undocumented and refugees, support and advocate for comprehensive educational programs and health benefits for children and youth, be an active voice against the human rights violations of immigrants and the lack of services to meet their needs, collaborate with existing agencies in providing services.

It is important for all actors involved to be prepared to assist in the diverse needs of immigrants and to ensure that all services are culturally relevant. Further research is necessary to expand knowledge that will assist in the development of social programs for immigrants who have difficulties overcoming the barriers of the immigrant experience. It is imperative that social programs developed to assist immigrants in the United States, specifically Colombians, be based on a concrete understanding of the factors that contribute to Colombians leaving their country and to the overall well-being of Colombians in the United States.

Limitations of this study & Implications for Research

There are several limitations to this study. First, there are no empirical studies available that can attest to the arrival of Colombian immigrants in Lancaster County. As such, this is a first attempt to document this wave of immigration. Second, this study has been done through the lenses of one Colombian immigrant, with historical information as a backdrop. Since there were other Latino immigrants who were also settling down in the same region, during the same period of time, it is important to conduct a more in-depth study where the intercession of the ethnic groups can be addressed. Additionally, a qualitative study with diverse community members will provide a more definite picture of the circumstances surrounding the immigration experience of Colombians in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

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